



Fire History

In order to fully understand the goal of the fire management plan, it is important to understand the history of fire in the area. Fire has long been a part of Humboldt and Del Norte counties. During the pre-settlement period (before 1875) the Native American people commonly used fires. The Native Americans found this area to be well suited to their needs. The access to the coast for trading and food, relatively mild temperatures, and the many tributaries provided for fresh water and food. They used fire for several reasons. It helped drive out rodents and insects, kept the forest understory open, which made for easier travel and hunting. Additionally it enhanced the forbs and grasses used in basket weaving. During the settlement period (1875-1897) European settlers used fire for maintenance and enlarging the pasturelands and as a land clearing method. These fires frequently escaped due to the lack of firefighting equipment or knowledge. Major land activities during the post settlement period (1898-1940) were livestock grazing, farming, debarking of the tanoak for tannin production and logging of Douglas-fir and Coast Redwood. Logging was clearly a dominant activity during this time period. Hundreds of small mills existed up and down the coastline; often the mills would have their own railroad for the transportation of the logs as well. In this time of unrefined mechanized equipment the logging operations were simplified as much as possible. Logged areas were burned to assist with the removal of the logs and reduce the logging

debris left behind. These fires were left to burn with no real control efforts. The same can be said for the area ranchers who commonly set fire to their land in order to maintain the grazing. This resulted in many large fires that are documented in area newspapers from 1880 to 1952.

Many studies have been conducted on the fire frequency of the Coast Redwood. Accordingly there are varying thoughts on the fire frequency. There is also a notable difference between the northern portion of the Unit verses the southern area. Estimates for the Redwoods in the northern portion of the Unit suggest a 50 to 100-year fire cycle. While in the southern portion of the unit the fire frequency is estimated to be 12 to 50 years. Reviews of area newspapers and various studies at Humboldt State University indicate that there was indeed a significant fire history from the late 1800's through early 1950's. Of note are 24 "fire seasons" between 1880 and 1952. During this time period the fire interval was 3.3 years. Accounts from these fires included entire towns being burned, such as the 1908 fire that destroyed the town of Luffenholz. People were left homeless, local mills and railroad tracks all perished from these large severe fires. After 1945 the severity and number of fires began to decline significantly. This was due, in part to two separate happenings. The State Forest Practice Act changed the manner in which lands were managed, which led to the curtailing and changing of logging activities. Secondly, World War II had taken the work force over seas; with the return of the soldiers came a active fire suppression program.



Luffenholtz , California. Near the present town of Westhaven
After the 1908 fire



**Humboldt – Del Norte Unit Headquarters staff
Circa 1945**



**Humboldt – Del Norte Unit Headquarters
Fortuna, California
Circa 1945**